

## Abstract

It has been over 200 years that the term “exhibition” (roughly in the meaning in which we use it today) appeared for the first time, when philosopher Friedrich Schlegel mentioned it in a letter to a friend after visiting the Louvre Museum in 1802. In addition to the concept’s long history, exhibitions are extensive, in the sense that they reach ample geographies, and are often under pressure to reach large numbers of people. They are also exhaustive, in the sense that they entail a wide range of formats and sizes and in that they represent diverse ideologies.

I will explore the question of whether the exhibition – in its concept, its form, its life, its omnipresence – is in addition exhausted and whether this potentially hinders its societal impact, assuming this medium is able to offer such possibility. Is it a practice that is potentially consumed, drained, or depleted, and fatigued of being simultaneously so many things, in such a variety of ways, in so many places of the world and for this extended period of time? Or does it simply need a rest to recoup its creative energies? These questions will be analysed through the lens of “closed exhibitions” of art (1960–2017), which arguably counter the logic of overproduction. This essay argues that closed exhibitions could potentially trigger novel reflections on issues of commonality and shared experience. ●

## Resumo

O termo “exposição” (sensivelmente no sentido que em que o usamos hoje) terá sido utilizado pela primeira vez há mais de 200 anos, quando o filósofo Friedrich Schlegel o referiu numa carta enviada a um amigo depois de visitar o Museu do Louvre em 1802. Para além da sua longa história, as exposições são conceitos amplos, no sentido em que abarcam vastas geografias e estão frequentemente sob pressão para chegar a um grande número de pessoas. E são também conceitos exaustivos, pois incluem vários formatos e dimensões, e representam ideologias diversas.

Este artigo procura interrogar se a exposição – no seu conceito, forma, vida e omnipresença – é também uma noção esgotada, e se isso pode dificultar o seu impacto social, assumindo que este *medium* tem essa capacidade. Será a exposição uma prática potencialmente gasta, esvaziada ou extenuada, e exausta de ser tantas coisas ao mesmo tempo, em tantos lugares do mundo, e por tanto tempo? Ou precisará simplesmente de fazer uma pausa para recuperar as suas energias criativas? Estas questões serão aqui analisadas pelo prisma de uma série de exposições artísticas “fechadas” (1960–2017), que parecem contrariar a lógica da superprodução. Este ensaio explora a forma como as “exposições fechadas” podem desencadear novas reflexões sobre ativismo coletivo e sobre experiência partilhada. ●

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# THE CLOSED EXHIBITION

## WHEN FORM NEEDS A BREAK

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In his interrogation of exhibition canons, Bruce Altshuler critically asserts that a “‘curatorial cannon’ will include a pantheon of curators as well as exhibitions – Harald Szeemann as well as *When Attitudes Become Form*” (Altshuler 2010-11, 9). Retrospectively, Szeemann’s 1969 show established itself as a landmark, unfurling a rich mapping of subsequent dates and events that were mainly related to processes of opening up, of presenting art and ideas to the public. Since this essay is less an interrogation of canonisation in exhibition-making and more an intention to reflect upon the function and necessity of the exhibitionary form, my efforts will concentrate on events that instead folded inward: “closed exhibitions” of art (1960-2017). Drawing on early conceptions of the function and necessity of the exhibition, I will explore the question of whether the exhibition of art – in its concept, form, life and omnipresence – is exhausted, and whether this potentially hinders its societal impact, assuming this medium is able to offer such possibility.

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One of the first traceable occasions on which we find the concept of “exhibition” used roughly as we know it today is in 1802. In September of that year, Friedrich Schlegel wrote a heartfelt letter to “a Friend at Dresden” describing two of his visits to the Louvre Museum, which by then had been open for nine years. During the first visit, after noting the unsuitability of the building to serve as “a temple for the noblest of the imitative arts”, Schlegel (2014 [1802], 2) narrates his journey through the museum’s halls, which ends with the Italian Old Masters. While complimenting the hanging and condemning the lighting, he interrupts the thread of the journey by noting his entrance into a room in which he finds works that were unarranged, disorganised and “not intended for immediate exhibition”, some of them in need of restoration (ibid., 2). He then goes back to describing rooms in which the Old Masters harmoniously cohabited with Etruscan antiquities.

In stark contrast to the description of his first visit, the description of his second visit starts with an air of disappointment: ancient treasures were moved to give space in the room to works by *modern* artists, who according to Schlegel were now organised “by what we should term an ‘Exhibition’” (ibid., 3). He immediately associates this concept with a temporary arrangement, hoping that after the occasion, the Old Masters will be put back in to place: “a few months must elapse before the pictures we love and reverence, or any others comparable to them in merit, again adorn the walls” (ibid., 3). Despite his seemingly dispirited remark, the philosopher recognises the value of these temporal arrangements: “every new collection of old paintings forms a separate body, a novel combination, in examining which the amateur often finds a new light thrown upon circumstances which till then had perhaps been unnoticed or ill-understood” (ibid., 4). Over two hundred years after the concept of the exhibition started to be used, the question of its value and its function then and now, remains: has the exhibition been, or is it still, a medium through which light is thrown upon circumstances that are unnoticed or ill-understood? should this even remain its primary function?

We can account for at least two hundred years of the concept of exhibition, in addition to hundreds of years of practices of display: practices that range from Upper Paleolithic ornaments to cabinets of curiosities, salons, collections, world’s fairs, contemporary biennials, or blockbuster shows, to mention only a few examples of an exhibit in its traditional understanding. Additionally, the concept has been more recently inhabited by the idea of the exhibition in the expanded sense. This entails theories and practices that go beyond the hanging of objects, instead freeing up space for project-oriented activities and dialogical exchanges. In short, the concept of exhibition (mainly within contemporary art) has generously embraced a wider variety of artistic encounters that are no longer reduced to unidirectional subject-object relationships.

In concept and in practice, exhibitions are extensive, in the sense that they reach a wide range of geographic locations and are often under pressure to reach large numbers of people. They are also exhaustive, in the sense that they entail a wide range of formats and sizes, and in that they may represent diverse ideologies. This is in itself not a problem. On the contrary, it reflects the significant political potential inherent in this medium and in its ability to transcend geographical, historical and material boundaries. Although much work remains to be done, efforts are being made by large-scale events, museums, and art institutions of all sizes to bring people of diverse socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds together through their exhibition programmes, often fostering community-building, identity formations and transcultural exchanges (see Byrne et al. 2018 and Kadoyama 2018). Through unprecedented articulations of concepts and ideas, exhibitions offer us a glance into living together within diversity, antagonism included. However, in some geographies, there seems to be an overproduction of exhibitions, which raises the question of whether such a large number is necessary. Thus, both function

and necessity are key issues to consider when analysing conceptual and historical approaches to exhibition-making. Is it a practice that is potentially consumed, drained or depleted, and fatigued of being simultaneously so many things, in such a variety of ways, in so many places of the world and for this extended period of time? Or does the exhibition merely need a rest to recoup its creative energies? Arguably, closed exhibitions potentially counter the logic of overproduction, and in my view are in some cases symptomatic of exhaustion of the medium. However, their study is relevant insofar as they seem to implicitly support the continued relevance of the exhibition. By this, I mean that despite their ostensible negation of the medium, they nonetheless operate within the same framework. At worst they advocate for its existence; at best they open up the question of the function or the need for the exhibition at all in today's context, as well as the question of its potential.

## **Possibilities of exhaustion: a brief history of closed exhibitions**

In order to offer a clear definition of a closed exhibition that is relevant to the questions I want to explore, I will use as a guide the concept of the closed exhibition and the examples proposed by the project "Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions" at Fri Art Kunsthalle Fribourg in Switzerland, plus one additional recent example towards the end of the article. Brief accounts of those closed exhibitions will be provided by separating them into four categories: closed exhibitions that have acted primarily as signature artworks, as pieces of Institutional Critique, as politics, and as experimentation. Such a divide follows neither the chronology of the original exhibitions nor the programming of their recent reconstructions at Fri Art. Closed exhibitions during the period of the 1960s to 1980s have identifiable features that differ from more recent models, as did artworks associated with different waves of Institutional Critique (see Steyerl 2006). However, my proposed structure allows for the identification of valuable perspectives offered by examples outside the western canon. The selection and proposed organisation of case studies for this brief historical account are not exhaustive of the history of closed exhibitions and are not intended to be inflexible categorisations. The selection is, however, representative and the headings useful insofar as they help us shed light on possibilities of exhaustion of the exhibition.

In 2016, Fri Art Kunsthalle planned a series of eleven closed art exhibitions that anachronistically recreated art historical closures of exhibition spaces. One after the other, eleven artists' gestures took over the institution between August and November. Curated by Mathieu Copeland, the project "Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions" came to an end with a celebration that marked the reopening of the

space after the series of closures and the launch of the accompanying publication, *The Anti Museum* (2017).

### a) Closed exhibitions as a signature

The retrospective began by recreating Lefevre Jean Claude's gesture. In 1981 the artist attached a text to the windows of the Yvon Lambert Gallery in Paris during its summer closure. The text announced "an exhibition by lefevre jean claude 11.07/31.08 '81", and nothing else happened. Other closed exhibitions recreated at Fri Art that acted at the time as works of art or as artistic processes included Matsuzawa Yutaka's 1964 *Ah, Nil, Ah, A Ceremony of Psi's Secret Embodiment Drowning in the Wilderness: Prototype Exhibition*, in which the artist opened his bedroom in Shimo Suwa for display, making it a "venue", while closing the Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo, reclaiming it as an "anti-venue". This gesture resonates with his studies at the time on matter/anti-matter, which culminated in his principle of the "vanishing of matter". Maurizio Cattelan's first solo exhibition took place in Bologna in 1989. The artist closed the Neon Gallery, leaving only a sign that stated in Italian "*torno subito*", meaning "be right back". In 2002 Santiago Sierra closed Lisson Gallery in London with a corrugated iron curtain (Fig. 1). This curtain was an attempt to emulate the closure of Argentinian banks during the crisis (1998-2002) in which the government prohibited customers from withdrawing money. In 2007 Rirkrit Tiravanija inaugurated the exhibition space at Toronto's OCAD by covering



Fig. 1 – Santiago Sierra, *Space closed by corrugated metal*, Lisson Gallery, London, September 2002, Print, 150 x 225 cm. © Santiago Sierra; Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

the entrance to the space with bricks, with a message painted in black letters claiming: “*Ne Travaillez Jamais*”, meaning “Never work”. This statement makes direct reference to the graffiti painted in 1953 by Guy Debord in Paris with the same message, expressing the Situationists’ views on the alienating working conditions of their time (Copeland 2016, 34-38).

The works above mentioned cut across art historical categories and periods. What they have in common is that they belong to a series of individual gestures performed by each (male) artist. Although in some cases these works included art historical or political references, each gesture seems to be connected not so much to an art historical network or community than to a somewhat self-referential artistic trajectory. This arguably results in making each individual’s oeuvre appear as an art historical exception. As a consequence, these gestures were more directly intended, consumed and interpreted as works of art: as statements, as signature works, the significance of which is better understood in the context of an artist’s whole body of work, including his exhibitions.

## b) As Institutional Critique

The retrospective also featured closures that were intended, consumed and interpreted less as works of art or as artists’ statements than as gestures directly linked, although not necessarily intentionally, to the first wave of Institutional Critique (with a capital I and C). This does not mean that the following closed exhibitions were devoid of self-referentiality: they weren’t, not aesthetically and not politically. Nor does this mean that the legitimacy of the criticism they strived to perform was reduced or amplified. It only means that the subject of criticism was – for better or for worse – defined in terms of art history, albeit only in retrospect. Alexander Alberro offers a detailed account of how in the 1960s, the art world’s infrastructure became central to some artists’ work, making the art institution an object of scrutiny. Here the art institution is understood in its expanded sense, as further elaborated by Andrea Fraser (2006). Institutional Critique made manifest artists’ dissatisfaction with institutional infrastructures and with the conditions they offered to staff, artists and members of the public (Alberro 2009). Two examples of this, among many others, are the closed exhibitions by Daniel Buren and Robert Barry. In October 1968, Buren was invited to his first solo exhibition at the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan. His response was to cover the entrance to the gallery space with his now classic striped wallpaper (Fig. 2), much to the disappointment of those who now think of Institutional Critique as a flight from the object or the individual. Green and white lines covered the glass door, preventing access to the space for the duration of the exhibition (Copeland 2016, 35). Subtly acknowledging the retrospective art historical interpretations of his body of work, and, similarly, identifying his gesture with what Schlegel thought was the function of an exhibition, Buren claims, “I did indeed close the gallery for over a month. But what I did in closing it





Fig. 2 – Daniel Buren, *Papiers collés blanc et vert, travail in situ* at gallery Apollinaire (Milan), October 1968. Detail. © DB-ADAGP Paris.

was to bring to light a work which today – more than at the time – is typical of a certain approach to its material” (Buren 2016, 83). What became evident through this type of closure was that the spatiotemporal framework traditionally enabled by an exhibition was not a precondition for art to exist.

While Buren closed the gallery “without saying it was closed” (ibid., 83), Robert Barry had three closed shows that came to be with an announcement in front of each space. The galleries sent out an invitation in his name that included the closure dates. The artist stated that from 17 to 31 December the Art & Project Gallery in Amsterdam would be closed, and on 30 December the Sperone Gallery would close in Turin. From 10 to 21 March 1970, the same happened at the Eugenia Butler Gallery in Los Angeles (Copeland 2016, 35). In Barry’s exhibitions, the work was the closure, yet he declares the work to be a direct attack on the gallery system: “Yes. I was anti-gallery ... I was pushing the art world context, and the gallery system” (Barry 2017, 94-95).

Neither Buren nor Barry make specific references to Institutional Critique when talking about their closed exhibitions. However, they both seem to acknowledge a disjunction between the intentions of their works and their further interpretations. As explained by Buren (2016, 85-86) the nature of their closures differed: the former wanted to criticise the way in which the galleries had been used so far – their

function – whereas the latter targeted their essence. Yet the two artists took the gallery space as both a medium for their work and as the object of their criticism.

### c) As politics

By describing closed exhibitions as politics, I am referring to those exhibitions that make statements beyond the world of art and exhibitions, simply because there is one. At different moments in history and through radical, yet indirect gestures, the following three closures instigated reflection either on systematic or political conditions.

A month before the paradigmatic *Tucumán Arde*, one of the artist groups from Rosario (Argentina) involved in its planning was also organising the “Ciclo de Arte Experimental (CAE)”. From May to September of 1968 this group organised a series of experiences in Rosario, the final one announced to take place from 7 to 19 October. Graciela Carnevale’s *Untitled*, later popularly known as *Encierro* (“lock-up” or “confinement”) aimed at making the public aware of the socio-political situation in the country by inviting them to think about the consequences of living under censorship and repression (Carnevale 2015, 77). *Encierro* was not merely a closed exhibition, but an action in which the public was locked up in a small gallery space: a closed exhibition with the public inside (Figs. 3 and 4). Guests, friends and passers-by came to the opening. Shortly after, Carnevale got out, locked the door without them knowing and left. She didn’t know the outcome until the next day: chaos. Outsiders trying to open the door, insiders tearing posters or trying to dismantle the window. Finally, a passer-by broke a window and set them free. For Carnevale, *Encierro* went beyond criticism, in so far as the group’s experiments were a “proposition of the possibility of doing things differently, of thinking differently, of considering art differently – with a role in society” (ibid., 79).

This section transitions from the critique of an oppressive regime to a reflection on an ostensibly less oppressive issue: the blurring of lines between work and leisure, often epitomised by artistic labour. With hints of institutional criticism, the following two closures relate to the body of work of the artist and the collective that produced them. As part of their series on holiday exhibitions, in 1999 Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov closed the Mehdi Chouakri Gallery in Berlin from 12 to 28 February, requesting that all staff members go on holiday, and indeed they took a vacation with the production money for the show. For the opening, visitors found a shut gallery with a sign by the door that read “Galerie wegen Urlaub geschlossen 12-28.2.1999”, meaning “Gallery closed for holidays 12-28/2/1999”. Upon everyone’s return, the artists asked staff members to keep the gallery space empty while they worked in the back. Staff members were then meant to talk to visitors about their time on holiday, and an album with photographs was displayed for the rest of the exhibitions alongside other works. The exhibition was open until April (Dejanov 2016, 110-11). Heger comments “...What





is related to work? Well, it's holidays. Artists are never expected to go on holiday ... [they] seem to others somehow always on vacation (or unemployed)" (2016, 118). This project touches upon how artistic work is socially perceived, often dismissively, in comparison to other types of labour that sit more comfortably with neoliberal notions of productivity.

In preparation for her upcoming exhibition, Maria Eichhorn conducted a research meeting with staff members of Chisenhale Gallery in London in which she inquired about their working conditions. Fundraising had become a significant aspect of the life of the institution "... leaving less time for artistic research or time to reflect" (Eichhorn 2016, 135). Staff members felt that work and personal time had become increasingly blended. In 2016, a year after this meeting, Eichhorn closed the gallery space for the duration of her show (23 April-29 May). Titled *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours*, it referred to the duration of the project, for which full-time permanent members of staff were expected not to work (Fig. 5). This was announced in a statement hung by the doors of the closed gallery, mentioning that the exhibition opened with a symposium "exploring contemporary labour conditions, featuring lectures by Isabell Lorey and Stewart Martin and chaired by Andrea Phillips ..." (Fig. 6). The artist unveils a link between time and artistic production: "... once work is suspended while staff members continue to receive pay, the artistic work can emerge" (Eichhorn 2016, 136). These days, creativity is drained and squeezed

Figs. 3 and 4 – View of Graciela Carnevale's 1968 action *Encierro* (Confinement), Rosario, Argentina. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5 – Maria Eichhorn, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* (2016). Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, 2016. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.

by bureaucratic tasks that are paradoxically dedicated to the survival of the art institution, the place where creativity is supposed to flourish.

These three case studies reflect upon the structure of closed exhibitions: they conceal in order to show. The first one locks you up to trigger thoughts of freedom, the second one sends you on holiday, challenging the social understanding of certain types of labour, and the third one releases you from the pressure of art in the hope that art will actually emerge from it. This last example relates to the exhaustion of exhibitions not only as a medium, but also to the energies and efforts invested in their production, or their overproduction.

Among the variety of possibilities of exhaustion discussed so far, these case studies also make us reflect on the financial aspects of exhibitions in general (be they open or closed): there are positive financial implications with signature works, no matter how explicit the reference to Argentina's financial crisis seems to be, as in Sierra's closure in Lisson Gallery; closed exhibitions are cheaper to produce, unless

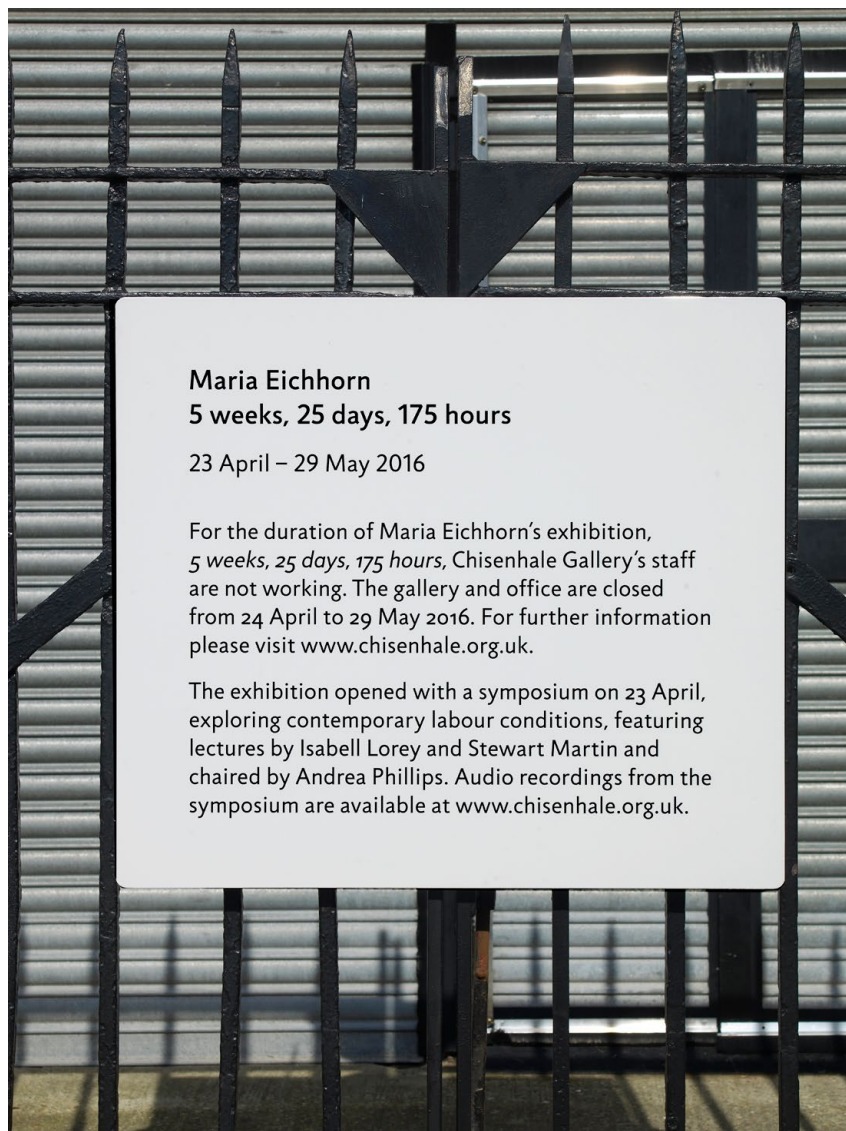


Fig. 6 – Maria Eichhorn, *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* (2016). Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, 2016. Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.

the budget is allocated for staff members going on holiday; exhibitions cost money, money that most art institutions do not have in excess, hence the centrality of fundraising. The list goes on. This, however, is only one side of the coin. It is important to consider that art exhibitions (mainly open ones) have also become mechanisms for survival, especially in large-and mid-scale art institutions: they not only bring money, but also help to increase the number of visitors, supporting institutions when justifying the continuation of public or private funding. For instance, the V&A's key marketing objectives include "to increase visitor numbers" and to "increase revenue through temporary exhibitions" (V&A, n.d.). From its reopening in 2012 to 2015, the Palais de Tokyo nearly tripled its number of visitors but hosted "more than five times as many exhibitions a year as it did pre-renovation, which is likely to keep people



Fig. 7 – Hi Red Center, “The Great Panorama Exhibition (aka Closing Event)”, 1964. Photograph provided by The Estate of Jiro Takamatsu, Courtesy of Yumiko Chiba Associates.



coming back” (The Art Newspaper 2016). This is not cynical criticism of increased participation. On the contrary, my intention here is to ask whether the increased number of exhibitions is at all related to the quality of the engagement with existing, new and diverse publics. In this case, I am making a gesture towards questions of when the production of exhibitions becomes overproduction, and whether anything is lost by multiplying the number of exhibitions available. The reference to Eichhorn’s project shows that, at the very least, the institutional pressure to increase the number of exhibitions produced can cause loss of creative energies due to the physical and intellectual exhaustion of the individuals assigned to produce them.

## d) As experimentation

The following examples are chronologically the first and the last interventions in our brief history of closures, both coincidentally taking place outside the west, in Japan, and in Costa Rica. The *Great Panorama Exhibition* (aka *Closing Event*) ran from 12 to 16 May 1964 at the Naiqua Gallery in Tokyo (Fig. 7). Hi Red Center, an anti-art collective formed mainly by Takamatsu Jiro, Akasegawa Genpei and Nakanishi Natsuyuki announced that the space was closed “by the hands of Hi Red Center. When you have free time, please make sure not to visit it.” A map of the space was printed, indicating where the closed door was. The opening day entailed its closure: the artists used hammers and nails to close the place, surrounded by no friends, no drinks and no speeches. The only thing left inside was a cockroach trapped in a glass as a witness. It was released and thanked at the opening party (Akasegawa 1984, 52). The opening part, on the last day, marked the opening of the closed space and Jasper Johns, who was in the crowd, did the honours and pulled out the first nail. Yoko Ono and Sam Francis were there too, alongside many other attendees. Drinks were served. By playing with the concepts of opening and closing, the collective wanted to turn the outside world into their object of presentation, into a great panorama. Naiqua Gallery was not a commercial space but an alternative gallery, or, as it was better known in Japan, a “rental gallery” that strived for experimentation and total freedom (Tomii 2016, 48). Hi Red Center’s intervention emerged in the context of the Anti-art movement in Japan, and as Reiko Tomii suggests, it would be a mistake to interpret it through the eyes of a Euro-American tradition (2016, 48). Akasegawa Genpei offered his perspective, admittedly among many others, when coming up with this idea. He was working with wrapping things such as canvases, a carpet, a radio or an electric fan. Eventually, he would want to wrap a building and the wrapping desire would only escalate: “after a building, I will have to wrap a city, a nation, the earth. And ultimately, the whole universe. Everything else will be no more than a stopover on this grand finale” (Akasegawa 2016, 51). Although referring to a different project, he draws upon the same rationale for *Great Panorama*. As I interpret it, this first ever closed exhibition made it clear that these groups of artists in Japan had come to the conclusion in the early 60s that what could be exhibited was infinite. The medium was exhausted and everything else, be it format, shape, size or region, would only be an escalation, a testing of the limits of what could be exhibited, where, and how. Anything else would be exploitation that would leave the medium exhausted. This message could not have been conveyed by opening yet another show; it had to be conveyed by closing it. *Great Panorama* was also the last event of the “Retrospective of Closed Exhibitions” in Fri Art, and also finished with an opening party in 2016.

To close this section, I will discuss what to my knowledge has been the last case of closure. This is not a single exhibition, and it was not part of the retrospective at Fri Art. TEOR/ética is a small visual arts organisation in San Jose, Costa Rica, founded in 1999 with a particular interest in supporting artistic practices and discourses from

<sup>1</sup> Miguel A. López. 2016. "Interview with Miguel A. López". Interview by Alaina Claire Feldman. *Independent Curators International*. Posted on 24 February 2017. Accessed March 2019, <http://curatorsintl.org/research/interview-with-miguel-a.-lopez>

Central America and the Caribbean. The space has been significant in providing support and international visibility to young artists from the region. In 2017, their curatorial team decided to undergo a process of institutional transformation into a space that was even more flexible and dynamic. They started by dismantling the top-down approach and experimenting with more collective forms of management, as well as thinking about "ways of doing". Inspired by Arts Collaboratory, an ecosystem that they belong to, composed of like-minded spaces in different parts of the world, ideas of institutional self-care, self-limitation and commonality surfaced. This brought about a discussion on the centrality of the exhibition, ultimately leading to the decision not to host any exhibitions in 2017. Instead, the exhibition space was used for research purposes and conversations, something that differed from what the space had been doing since its inception. This decision was not only an institutional experiment but also "a response to the fatigue of always doing the same and the bureaucratisation of daily life".<sup>1</sup> The temporary closure of the whole exhibition programme directly gestures towards the problem of exhaustion, which is not only of an intellectual type, as *Great Panorama* showed us, but also of a physical kind. *5 weeks, 25 days, 175 hours* shed light on staff members and artists in the art institution being exhausted, partly due to the blurring of lines between labour and leisure that have become part of the overall functioning of the institution. TEOR/ética's case, however, points to the exhibition as the direct cause of institutional fatigue. The exhibition, once and often still the heart of art institutions, is now put aside to bring new life into their programming. It is no longer about experimenting with possibilities that the exhibition allows for, but about experimenting with the possibilities that emerge without it, especially if this translates into caring for a public or into building communities around your arts organisation.

## What's lost

A brief snapshot of the history of closed exhibitions sheds light on several possibilities of exhaustion, ranging from tiredness as a result of the art world's infrastructure, its institutions or the working conditions they offer; of debilitating political regimes; or of the limitations of the art object when bound to materiality and place. In most cases – especially with closed exhibitions as Institutional Critique, as politics, and as experimentation – these diverse possibilities do justice to Schlegel's original conception of the (open) exhibition by throwing light "upon circumstances which till then had perhaps been unnoticed or ill-understood" (2014 [1802], 4). However, like most exhibitions, closed exhibitions are a double-edged sword. They do not negate the exhibition as form, and it is yet to be seen whether they can have an impact on much-needed critical reflection upon – and renovation of – the art institution. In fact, from the above case studies, we learned that some closed exhibitions affirm the institution and its traditional formats in so far as the

closures are merely temporary. Much of the time, the programme returns to normal in the same way that Schlegel's Old Masters were bound to return to display at the Louvre Museum after 1802.

At worst, a closed exhibition can be a missed opportunity for a potentially fruitful, shared experience. At best, it can be only a missed opportunity to put together yet one more display that the world needn't see. Questions of function and necessity beyond the importance of self-referentiality remain open in closed exhibitions as signatures. Much work that lies beyond the scope of this essay is needed to address them, and much interpretative work has been done already in addressing the significance of individual artistic trajectories. Thus, this will be put aside in this context. Closed exhibitions that (albeit unintentionally) speak to the canon of Institutional Critique unveiled certain conditions that were at the time overlooked. As valuable and significant as they were, questions of function and necessity seem to have been overshadowed by art historical discussions. These discussions allowed us art historians and art critics to build a narrative around critical gestures produced by artists. Although often followed by optimism (Meyer 1993, Fraser 2006, 123 and Bass 2016), such gestures were quickly scrutinised in the field by questioning whether this strand of conceptual art went far enough. Seen only from the perspective of the construction of this particular narrative, and without considering the public value that these events might have had, there is the question of whether exhibitions should speak mainly to art enthusiasts, not to mention the recent interest amongst scholars to theorise and (re?) historicise reconstructed art historical exhibitions, which on their own have great historical and pedagogical value, especially for teachers of art history. Beyond the general art history lesson and the added experience of learning beyond the textbook, the risk of these exhibitions is again that they may be reduced to self-referentiality, to being footnotes in the art historical canon, which would only result in further exhaustion. Returning to the first missed opportunity, one should ask what a closed exhibition says about commonality and shared experience, which are areas in which the exhibition can arguably exert its political potential. Are these aspects lost?

## **Conclusion: exhaustion, temporality and lessons learned**

Closed exhibitions here reveal two significant aspects, albeit certainly not the only ones, in relation to how the contemporary art exhibition sometimes unfolds: either as a mechanism for the perpetuation of power or as a medium of possibility. In the former scenario, the exhibition is exhausted because certainty is being favoured over experimentation, formulaic approaches over risks and variety of experience over meaningful encounters. The exhibition is tired of attracting the public instead



of creating it, of ticking boxes instead of building communities. It is tired of serving as an instrument for managerial purposes, of surviving and helping the institution to survive instead of living a public life of its own. Most importantly, it is tired of being a signature, a footnote to a centralised, elitist and imperial art historical narrative. This seems particularly exhausting when, upon reflection on the latter scenario, the exhibition is a medium from which valuable and transferable lessons could be learned.

In both its traditional and its expanded sense, the exhibition is a space where a multiplicity of objects, stories, materials, ideas or people can be together in a shared space, often in “novel combination[s]” and throwing new light “upon circumstances which till then had perhaps been unnoticed or ill understood” (Schlegel 2014 [1802]). Not only is the medium itself constituted by diversity and multiplicity, but it can also project these values to the outside by offering the opportunity for people to gather around it, even when disagreeing. Within an artistic encounter of this sort, we sometimes experience cross-cultural narratives, becoming aware of the possibility to decentralise the dominant stories that have been constituting and feeding our identities. Some exhibitions even unveil how histories are constructed elsewhere, or how our own stories, passions, and beliefs could be articulated from a different perspective. The exhibition as a medium has proven successful, within its realm, in disrupting our sense of imperial certainty, not by means of reproducing imperial values through its sizes, formats or geographical reach, but rather by calling them into question and showing us how conceptions of centre/periphery are movable. Numerous exhibitions offer us the option to disturb our long-term constructed aesthetic taste charged with prejudice and indoctrination, making us see that unlearning is not only possible but potentially pleasing and meaningful, even if at times hard and uncomfortable. These lessons, and probably many others, are (if only potentially) transferable to social and political realms, as we saw with Carnavale’s approach to *Encierro*.

Beyond notions of commonality, acceptance, and shared experience that exhibitions could imaginably teach us, there are specific meaningful notes to extract from closed exhibitions. Despite not always being places for shared physical experiences, some closed exhibitions offer us the possibility of exercising collective curiosity, for wondering and for thinking together even if physically apart. Countering the anxiety for overproduction and the urgency for immediate cultural satisfaction, a closed exhibition demands that we take a break to think and to reflect. I hereby conclude by suggesting that investing in further research around each exhibition and around strategies to strengthen community engagement seems more necessary than to be constantly propelling new ones. More time is needed for each proposition to grow and to create communities around it. Deeper reflection could come through diversifying research methodologies and subjects surrounding the exhibition space instead of footnoting narratives; stretching production and public engagement timescales instead of increasing outcomes; and allowing for the creation of communities around cultural production, acknowledging the importance of time and

patience. Ultimately, the contemporary art exhibition should be allowed to exert and instigate the same patience that Schlegel used to characterise the concept of exhibition to his friend in Dresden in the first place, making temporality not only a necessary condition but its most valuable one, even if for him this meant buying time before his revered Old Masters were put back into place. ●

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